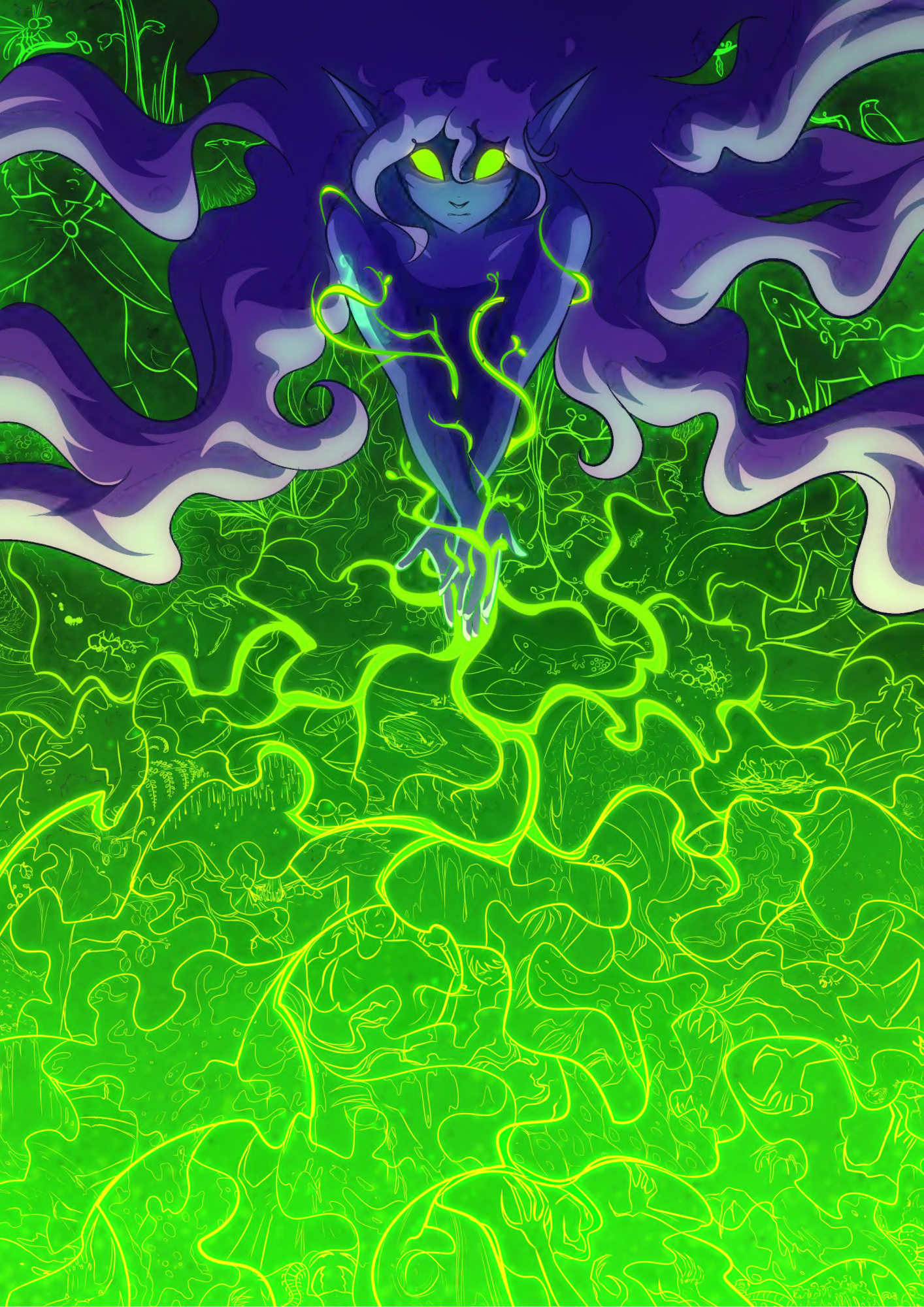
Chapter 22

Daybreak

PONK
I don't like this.
Why would they go underground?
And HOW?
I went over this place with every tool I had!

If the Singing Caves are involved...
Falst's soul barrier is stronger than most, but we don't know if Dainix's immunity holds outside of his Crucible form.
Are you up for-?
Alinva?
But I can't risk heightened exposure to The Dragon unless you keep him at bay.
I might be able to find them. Give me a minute.
I've only done this in my sleep.



Branches on branches. It doesn't stop.
It doesn't know how to stop.
Alinva?
Alinva.
Was she already an infinity before she became a world?
Alinva, that's
How can she stand it?
SNAP
WHEW!
You... you started crying.
I assumed that was bad.
Oh. Uh- thanks.
If we can't find a way down fast, we're going to have to make one.
They're down there, and they're hurt.
And they're definitely not alone.

Is it the caves? Can you tell?
I - I can't. I'm sorry.
I suppose it doesn't matter.
If the academy asks, it was like this when we got here.
CHUNK
GRIND
How fast can you move that much rock?
Laden with soul energy after four thousand years undisturbed?
In brief - not fast.
Okay.
Let me loosen it up for you.
RRRRRRRRRR
CRICK
CRACK
CRICK

Don't risk a collapse!
Don't worry.
These roots go all the way down.
I can hold it together.
Just get the rock out of the way, please.
Ha.
You know, my mother also makes this look very easy.
Wow.

I guess that explains where the wind is coming from.
Can you see anything we need to worry about?
Does the dragon skeleton count?
Only if it's moving?
Then no.
It looks like a burrower wyrm...
Maybe it tunneled in here by mistake?
Broke the place open, then got killed by those drone automatons?
I can see why this place was abandoned.

Especially if this leads where I think it does.
Those cave-crawlers got in here somehow.
Until we're truly desperate, the Singing Caves are not a way out.
Something was here.
The crawlers?
No. Some THING.
There was something here, and someone came and took it.
Recently.
There's damage here that hasn't had time to corrode.
The center of the dais is less weathered, like it's been covered by something until recently.
And this lacrima array...
This one's for Stone. It must've made something that was solid.
But there's nothing here.

These claw marks...
It could've been a crawler?
...Could be.
I can't imagine why they'd take... whatever was here.
Can you make out what this thing was supposed to do?
Not really.
It's got lacrimas for all six elements, but the runes are all scuffed up.
This room must've been pretty well-worn from all the cave crawlers and giant bugs coming up from the Caves.
That's a good point.
Whatever the Ancients were making here must've been sturdy to weather that kind of-
That-
uh-
Falst.
What? What's wrong?
If this is how they all got in -
-why are there no Crawlers in this room?

GLINT
CLANG!!!
Hnngh!
Are you-?!
Go! The door! GO!

Falst?
Uh huh.
That didn't sound like a door opening.
Uh-uh.
Is it because you punched the panel on the other side?
You think I broke it more than four thousand years of rot?!
It was working before!
It was working after I punched it too!
Here's a thought-
If this place won't open doors for YOU-
What's it supposed to think about THAT?!

Falst-
Give me a minute- maybe I can force it-
Rgh! My hand still hasn't-
Falst!
MOVE!
CLANG
SPL

Come on!

WHIRR
No complaints about killing THIS thing, right?
I-
I-
I'll keep it busy.
Focus on breaking the door down!
W-wait.
Falst!
Don't look at its eyes!
SPURK
SHRIPP

SKIDD
Paying attention?
CHUNK!

SLAM
SWIPE
You're already falling apart.
SKLSH
SHRIPE

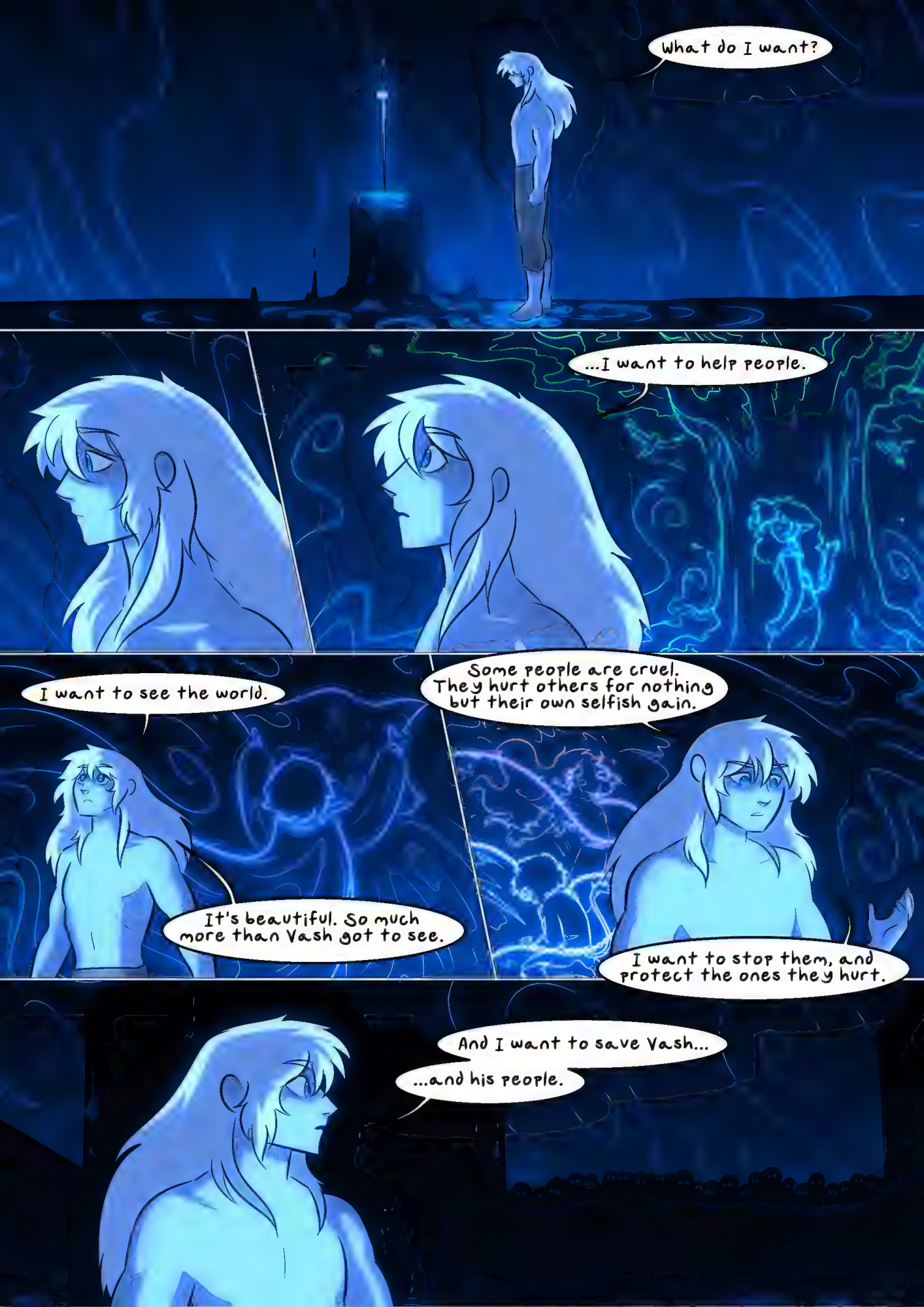
CRACK
Looks like I'm doing you a favor.

AHH
GRAAA

HAM!
nnnh
no-

y-
you said you'd burn out-
LISTEN.
I can't get us out of here.
You CAN.
I- I can't-
Spellcarve.
I've only studied Life!
More than me.
N-no!
I'm not- I haven't-
Ngh!
I trust you.

-kh-!


What do I want?
...I want to help people.
I want to see the world.
It's beautiful. So much more than Vash got to see.
Some people are cruel. They hurt others for nothing but their own selfish gain.
I want to stop them, and protect the ones they hurt.
And I want to save Vash...
...and his people.

It won't be easy.
That's okay.
I won't be alone.

Hiya.
Feeling better?
...Tess.
Got it in one!
Nice to see you're not too rattled.
Where are the others?
Hard to say. Falst and the Ravvan went scouting and didn't come back. Erin and Alinva are looking for them.
Oh.
Okay.
And where do you think you're going?
To save them. Are you coming?
Huh!
Well, I am on strict orders to not let you do anything stupid.
And like Mom always says, there's nothing stupider than leaving Erin unsupervised.

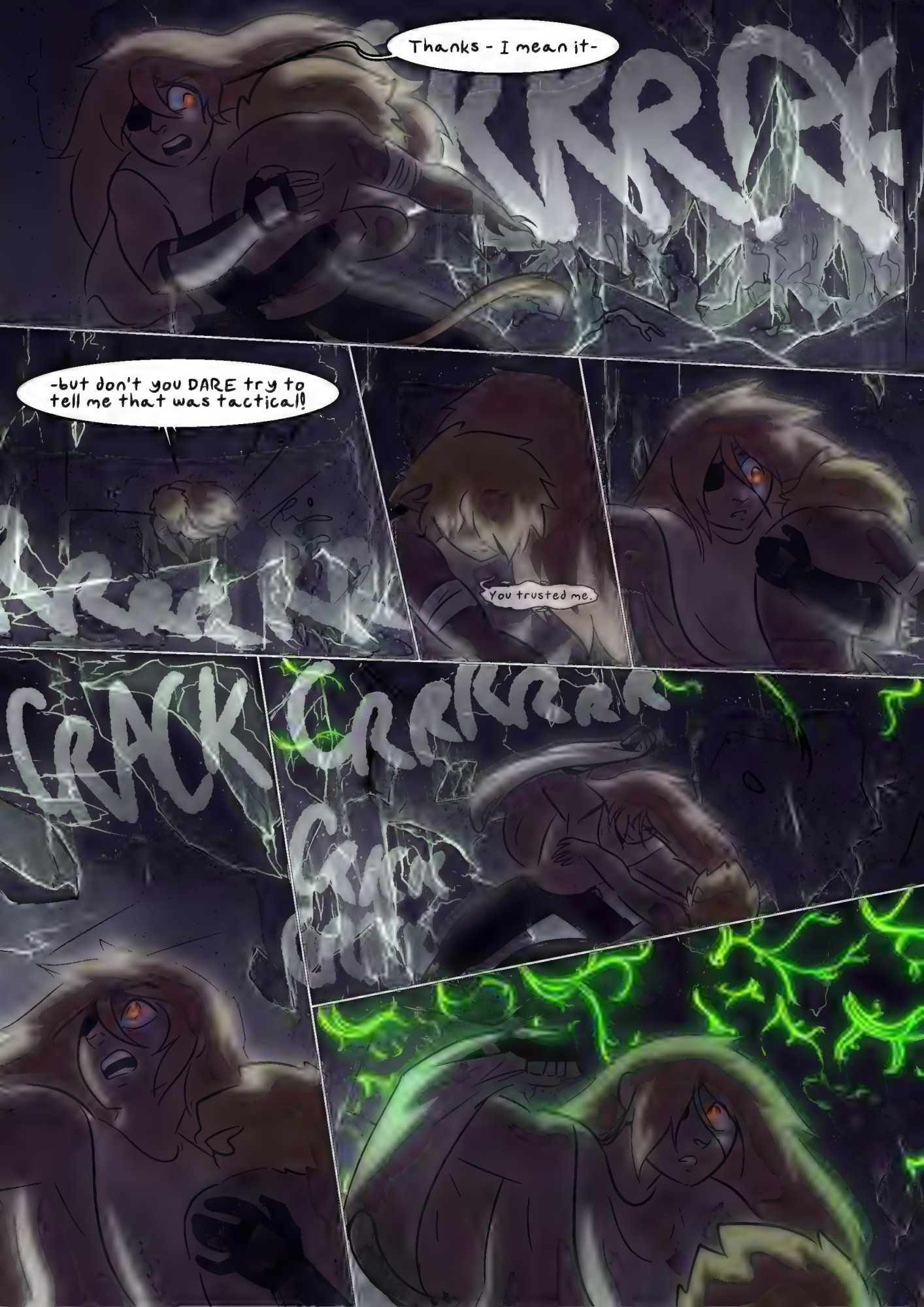
SYSHH
SHAAA
SHUNK!

SHRIPP
FLT
SHUURT
SHAA!

CRICK
CRACK

AH- MMGH!
WHAM

CRACK


Thanks - I mean it-
KRRRG
-but don't you DARE try to tell me that was tactical!
You trusted me.
CRACK
CRRUCH

BOP
We're following this spellbird to your location.
Hang in there.
How-?
CRACK

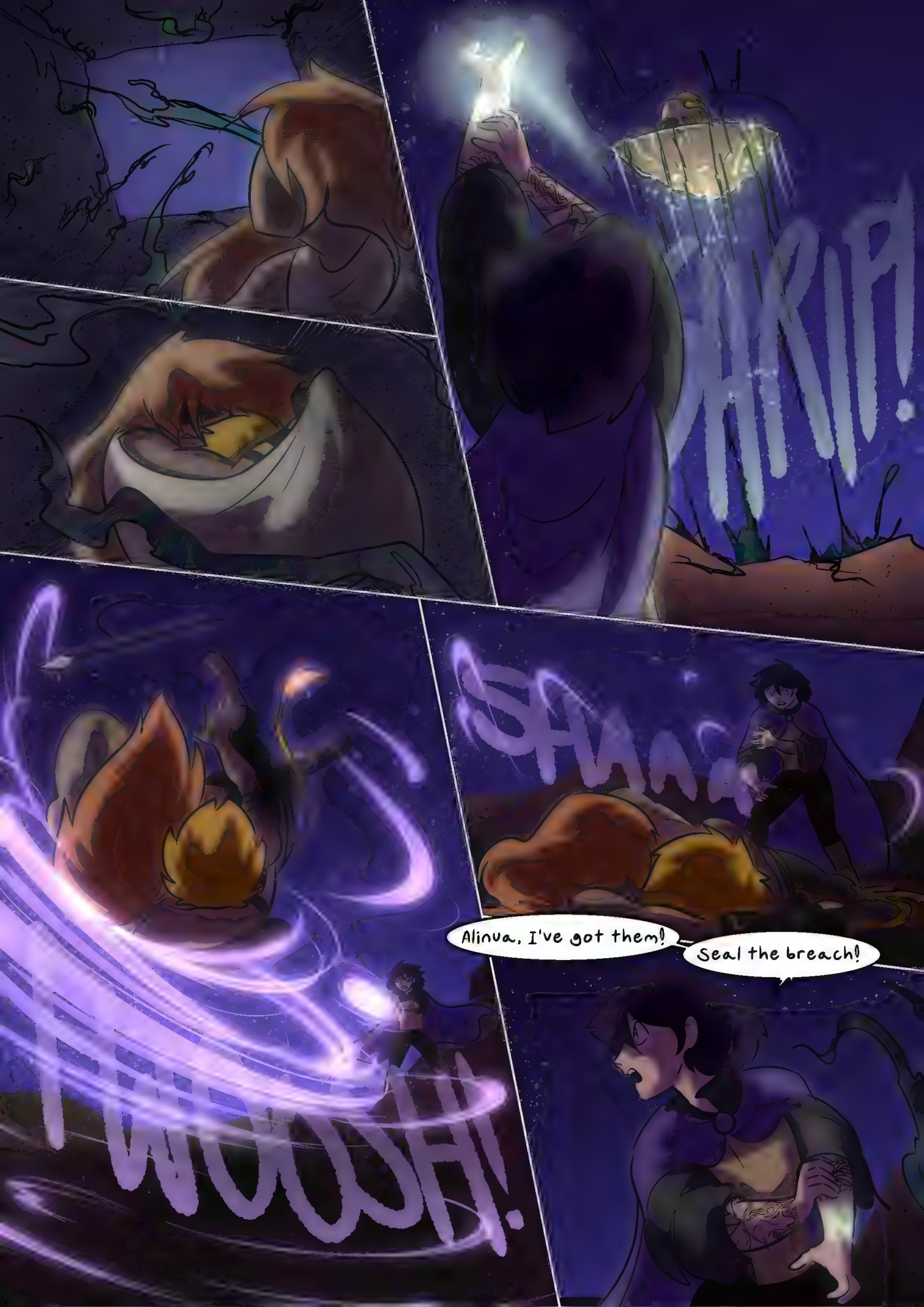
GRINDING
We've exposed a breach to the Caves.
Are you-?
I'm fine.
But they might not be coming up alone.
CRACK

That was Erin's voice!
h-he's gonna be so smug about this-
We're not out of it yet!
gnh!
THWAP
Come on -
Yes!
CRACK

CLAP
CRACK
No! No - you can't-!
Let go! Move.
Move, damn you.
You haven't given your all.
There's breath in your body, so spend it on something!
Let go!
Now MOVE!
SHING

What-?
Falst, how-?
is it gone?
You, uh- y-yes. I'm here. I'm fine!
good. that's...
good
SRT
AHH

What-?
What is it?
I can't-
Get them out of there.
NOW!
They'd better be holding on tight.


SHRIP!
SHAAA
Alinua, I've got them!
Seal the breach!
WOOSH!

Ah!
CRICK
SHRIP
I assume you didn't do that?
No!
This... thing- It's eating the roots - and it's fighting me!
Fascinating. Let me try-
-uh-
I'll join you shortly.
Draw it away, if you can.
I can.
CRACK

ngh...
Ah!
Erin-?
Thank goodness. Injuries minor and your soul barrier is intact.
No trace energies - no corruption -
-and if I'm not mistaken, you've been recently healed with Life magic.
Very impressive, Falst, though if I find another lacrima missing I-
What's wrong?
Nothing.
I can fix it.

CRACK
Help her, if you can.
I don't know how long this will take.
I-
Understood.
If you fight me on this, I will ensure the Paladins bury us both so deep you'll never see your precious sun again.
So just this once-
-play dead.

I...
I'M A GENIUS!
I knew you were gonna be smug
It's all right, Falst! You're going to be fine!
Where's Dainix? I need to-
I suspected, of course, but I couldn't be sure -
But I CAN!
I DID!
But the Void Dragon, the "seventh element", cave corruption - it all adds up perfectly!
It was textbook elemental corruption made unique only by the fact that it was of a form nobody could control or stop!
explain when I'm not dying as much
As if you'll listen to me when you can actually move.

What's the situation?
Not... good...!
It's absorbing anything I grow, and I can... barely hold it!
Is Erin... done yet?!
I don't think so.
But if it's mostly made of wood now-
FWOOSH
KA-THUNK

...nh-
SHAB!
Ah!
Alinva! Don't look at its eyes!
It has EYES now?!
Wah!
Oh no! I didn't-
FWOOM

DAINIX!
SHLP
No! No no no!
NO!
NO MORE!

THUMP
POW!
Falst, how am I supposed to deal with a monster-
-when I have to keep stopping you from trying to PUNCH it with a broken arm?!
I'm FINE. Just let me catch my breath-
ERIN!
Find a way to stop it!
NOW!
Dainix!
Oh dear. Fire was my Plan A.
All right, I'll figure something out.
Anything I should know about it first?
Everything I did only made it stronger-
-and I am SICK and TIRED of being HELPLESS!

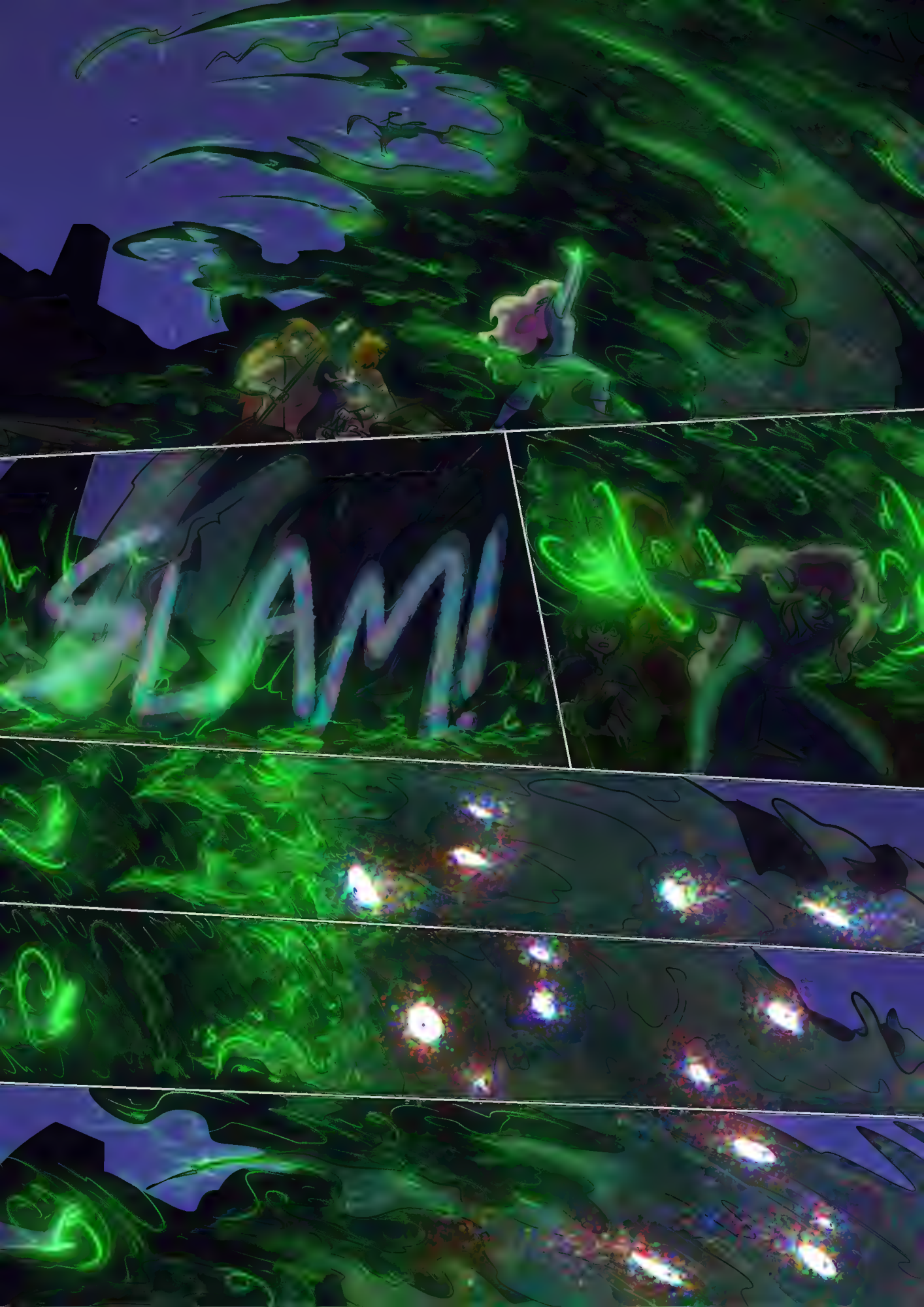
He's not breathing!
It only had him for a second-!
But if he breathed any of it in-
He- he's not injured!
I can't get in to draw it out!
FWOOM
COUCH
COUCH
OW
Looks like fire's back on the table!
I'll be back shortly.
It's time we put an end to this.

CRACK
Very interesting.
I've never heard of a crawler that amalgamates instead of consuming.
You must be a very rare mutation.
Or perhaps a very old one.
Is he gloating?!
Oh, no.
I think he's taking notes.
d-does he know...
about the eyes...?

FLARA
Now let's see.
If Void corruption acts like every other elemental energy-
-it must aggravate some physical essence of The Dragon present in the body.
Given his personality, that essence is most likely bound to our hunger to possess and consume.
Unbalanced, this would lead to the primary symptom of cave-corruption-
Insatiable hunger.
But you've taken it even farther, haven't you?
You have no real body. Your hunger sustains no form and serves no purpose.
Your unstructured starvation has reduced you to nothing but a slow, cumbersome pile of hungry meat.
Frankly, I'm surprised you managed to last this long.
And I wish I could help you.
I'm sorry.

Ah-!
KRACKOOM
HUNGRY

POW!
Come on!
how did it DO that
Erin! Fire! NOW!
Uh-!
SPLAP
Oh no.
Uh, give me a minute-
What do you MEAN?!
What happened?
I'll be fine as soon as I get this stuff off me-!
I can buy you a minute or two-
NO!
No more sacrifices!
I AM NOT LOSING ANYONE ELSE TODAY!


SLAM!

Geugh!
What happened? Did you scare it off?
Oh, no.
It-it's all right.
It's going to be fine.

Whenever you're ready.
CRACK

WHOOSH
SSSSS
WHA
Woo!
He catches on quick!

...Better.
anything I say right now is going to come out angry
I'm sorry.
How...
...how could you do that to me?
I - the first thing you ever learned -
the FIRST thing you TAUGHT me-
-was how awful it was to see someone die for you!

You do remember the evil dragon god?
Hkk. Stop it. Laughing hurts.
I thought I was already dead.
My body, my existence...
It wasn't my own.
It couldn't be. It had cost the world too much.
I owed a debt, but the more I lived, the harder it became to repay it.
But I think...
I think the dead don't hold us to our debts.
You don't owe anyone your life.
I don't think that's true.
I feel like I've apologized to you every day of my life.
What I haven't said enough...
...is "thank you."

CRKRK
Sorry to interrupt. I just thought the open breach to the Caves was a slightly pressing priority.
Hi, Erin.
Is everyone okay?
More or less.
Dainix probably couldn't light a candle right now, and we'll likely have to knock Falst unconscious before he lets us patch him up-
But it's nothing we can't handle together.
I'm just saying, I got two shoulders. I can carry both of you.
It's a kind offer, but-
Feel free to try with whichever hand you're prepared to lose.
And Vash?
If he spoke to you, then you know more than I do.
Ah.
Well, after firmly indicating he didn't want you stabbing yourself again, he was drawn back into imprisonment.
Presumably his situation is left broadly unchanged -
- And that means our plan is as well.
This time, no shortcuts.
We get The Dragon under control.
Then we rescue Vash.

And if you try that stabby thing again, I'm snapping the sword in half myself.
I'll hold you to that.
Careful.
Nh-
Easy.
Heavier than he looks, right?
IT'S FINE.
Take it slow.
There's a long way to go...
...but we made it through the night.

THANK YOU FOR READING THE FIRST ARC!
THE STORY CONTINUES JANUARY 1, 2024!